



Glossary of Task Words

Understanding the meaning of words, especially task words, helps you to know exactly what is being asked of you. It takes you half way towards narrowing down your material and selecting your answer.

Task words direct you and tell you how to go about answering a question. Here is a list of such words and others that you are most likely to come across frequently in your course.

Table of task words	
Words	What they (might) mean...
Account for	Explain, clarify, give reasons for. (Quite different from "Give an account of which is more like 'describe in detail').
Analyse	Break an issue down into its component parts, discuss them and show how they interrelate.
Assess	Consider the value or importance of something, paying due attention to positive, negative and disputable aspects, and citing the judgements of any known authorities as well as your own.
Argue	Make a case, based on appropriate evidence for and/or against some given point of view.
Comment on	Too vague to be sure, but safe to assume it means something more than 'describe' or 'summarise' and more likely implies 'analyse' or 'assess'.
Compare	Identify the characteristics or qualities two or more things have in common (but probably pointing out their differences as well).
Contrast	Point out the difference between two things (but probably point out their similarities as well).
Criticise	Spell out your judgement as to the value or truth of something, indicating the criteria on which you base your judgement and citing specific instances of how the criteria apply in this case.
Define	Make a statement as to the meaning or interpretation of something, giving sufficient detail as to allow it to be distinguished from similar things.
Describe	Spell out the main aspects of an idea or topic or the sequence in which a series of things happened.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument. Examine key points and possible interpretations, sift and debate, giving reasons for and against. Draw a conclusion.
Evaluate	Make an appraisal or the worth of something, in the light of its apparent truth; include your personal opinion. Like 'assess'.

Enumerate	List some relevant items, possibly in continuous prose (rather than note form) and perhaps 'describe' them (see above) as well.
Examine	Present in depth and investigate the implications.
Explain	Tell how things work or how they came to be the way they are, including perhaps some need to 'describe' and to 'analyse' (see above).
To what extent...?	Explore the case for a stated proposition or explanation, much in the manner of 'assess' and 'criticise' (see above), probably arguing for a less than total acceptance of the proposition.
How far	Similar to 'to what extent...?' (see above)
Identify	Pick out what you regard as the key features of something, perhaps making clear the criteria you use.
Illustrate	Similar to 'explain' (see above), but probably asking for the quoting of specific examples or statistics or possibly the drawing of maps, graphs, sketches etc.
Interpret	Clarify something or 'explain' (see above), perhaps indicating how the thing relates to some other thing or perspective.
Justify	Express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion, probably including the need to 'argue' (see above) a case.
Outline	Indicate the main features of a topic or sequence of events, possibly setting them within a clear structure or framework to show how they interrelate.
Prove	Demonstrate the truth of something by offering irrefutable evidence and/or logical sequence of statements leading from evidence to conclusion.
Reconcile	Show how two apparently opposed or mutually exclusive ideas or propositions can be seen to be similar in important respects, if not identical. Involves need to 'analyse' and 'justify' (see above).
Relate	Either 'explain' (see above) how things happened or are connected in a cause-and-effect sense, or may imply 'compare' and 'contrast' (see above).
Review	Survey a topic, with the emphasis on 'assess' rather than 'describe' (see above).
State	Express the main points of an idea or topic, perhaps in the manner of 'describe' or 'enumerate' (see above).
Summarise	'State' (see above) the main features of an argument, omitting all superfluous detail and side-issues.
Trace	Identify the connection between one thing and another either in a developmental sense over a period of time, or else in a cause and effect sense. May imply both 'describe' and 'explain' (see above).

Other useful definitions	
Words	What they (might) mean...

Assumption	Something which is accepted as being true for the purpose of an argument.
Issue	An important topic for discussion; something worth thinking and raising questions about.
Methodology	A system of methods and principles for doing something. Often used to explain methods for carrying out research.
Objective	It is the point or the thing aimed at. It is what you want to achieve by a particular activity.

References

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